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ABSTRACT

Encounter groups, in which blacks and whites were brought together to reduce their mutual fear and hatred, are discussed. Major goals of the groups were: (1) to decrease isolation and separation between the races, thereby reducing distorted interracial conceptions; and (2) to help group members feel accepted as fellow human beings by members of both races. Group structure is considered on the basis of the author's experience. Such facets as recruitment, consistency, duration and content are included. The paper describes some of the major processes which occur in these complex groups. Among these are: (1) resistance to personal involvement; (2) dealing with the realities of community prejudice; (3) using personality differences as a means of undercutting racial separateness; (4) physical activity; and (5) the value of racial identity in the evolution of group. cohesiveness. The role of the group leader during various stages of the group was closely scrutinized. The paper concluded hopefully that what is learned in such groups might be extended to the community at large. (TL)

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THE USE OF INTER-RACIAL GROUP EXPERIENCE FOR THE REDUCTION OF RACIAL TENSION

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INTRODUCTION

In an effort to reduce their mutual fear and hatred, blacks and whites have beenbrought together in weekly encounter groups.* (see footnote) For many who have participated in the groups during most of this year, the haze of bigotry which formed a barrier to effective communication has been lifted. They have experienced a measure of honest communications across race lines and have found it to be mutually beneficial and rewarding. For some this has resulted in fundamental changes in attitude which have been accompaned by important positive changes in their race-related activities in the community.

The same groups have been used by others merely to ventilate or to support already established positions. These individuals were closed to change. The challenge they posed to the more open members was at times demoralizing, but if handled creatively added substantially to the group process.

This paper represents a studied time out after a victorious but split decisioned first round. It describes some of the major processes which occur in these complex groups and provides some guidelines for directing similar groups more effectively.

* (footnote) The initial meetings were sponsored by the Louisiana Group Psychotherapy Association. Drs. Hugh Mullan and Arthur Burdon provided much of the inspiration and driving force necessary to maintain the program through its most difficult formative stage.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Many studies have described the socio-cultural factors which contribute to ethnocentrism and bigotry (Campbell 1967) (Alport 1954) (Mydrall 1944). Psychoanalytic studies (Kardiner 1951) (McLean 1946) (Seward 1956) have detailed the complex psychodynamic origins of prejudice. (GAP 1957) (Grier 1968) (Cobbs 1968). On the individual intrapsychic level, prejudice represents a faulty attempt to cope with intolerable feelings of self-contempt by directing the hatred away from the despised part of oneself, projecting them onto another person or group who, through the distortions of racial mythology, can serve as a substitute representative for the bad part of the self. The individual is then able to enoy an illusory feeling of superiority because he is experiencing only the "superior" aspects of himself as he looks down upon these "inferior" others.

To preserve the strength of such distorted myths about other races, one must remain isolated and separated from members of the other race. (Curtis 1967) Thus isolation and separation, with concommitant feelings of inadequacy, provide the most fertile grounds for the growth of stereotyping and prejudice. It has been demonstrated (Rubin 1967) (Dean 1955) that when an individual is better able to accept himself, he becomes better able to accept others.

The major goals of our groups have therefore been to decrease isolation and separation between the races, thereby reducing the distorted conceptions one race has of the other and the need for such distortions, and to help group members to feel accepted as fellow human beings by members of both races. The most valuable experience which did occur when the groups

were performing at an opitmal level, was for the individual's self-esteem to be enhanced by his meaningful encounter with a member of the other race. It has been demonstrated repeatedly that as a person feels more accepted by others he has less doubt about his own worth; he has less fear of being attacked and less need to attack others in order to protect himself. It is easy to observe that as individuals become defined on the basis of their real personal qualities within the group, there is less area for the operation of racial stereotypes.

GROUP STRUCTURE

It is difficult to obtain members for these groups at first. Optimally, the groups should be jointly sponsored by the Black and the White community. Members may be recruited from church groups, fraternal organizations, unions, city government, etc. It is helpful to balance the groups when possible, with equal numbers of Blacks and Whites and with individuals from a variety of backrounds with different types of personalities. (Samuels 1964) In a group with such heterogeneous make-up it is at first more difficult to develop a feeling of group cohesiveness, but the depth and breadth of the interchange fostered by such heterogeneity promotes a more thorough working through of problems and a more meaningful cohesiveness in the long run. (Mullen 1962) The optimum duration of this type of group is largely dependent upon its goals. Members must meet together long enough to establish relationships of sufficient trust to deal intimately with their feelings of hostility and prejudice. This process always involves some work with other personal problems indirectly related to problems of race. If the group has been successful, after a period of time the working-through of racial material becomes secondary to the more personal problems,

but these are more appropriately dealt with in a regular psychotherapy group. Indeed the emergence of these more personal problems is a signal that the group is succeeding. A group with experienced leadership may work through racially-centered impediments to communication in twelve weeks. Shorter or longer periods may be dictated by the depth of prejudice involved, and the ultimate goals of the group. It is not necessary to be a professional group therapist to lead a group of this nature, but in order to do the job effectively it is important to understand some aspects of the group process and to be able to identify and control the emergence of undue anxiety or other disturbing emotions. Experienced group therapists can be of great value in supervising those who are not trained group leaders. Such supervision is probably necessary if the group is to succeed at an intensive level without undue interruption.

We have found that these groups work best when there are no more than twelve members. Meetings should be held weekly and last for 1½ to 2 hours. After the groups have been meeting for a month or two, it has been helpful to hold social functions for the group members. Such parties have proven to be a positive force towards group cohesiveness and have brought out some problems which had not emerged in the formal group setting. The increased ease among members fostered by purely social interaction, seems to offset the disadvantages of socializing which are encountered in the usual group psychotherapy situation.

THE ROLE OF THE GROUP LEADER DURING VARIOUS STAGES OF THE GROUP

The principal task of the group leader has been to keep the members involved with one another so that they can confront one another with any sterotyped distortions they may have. Thus freeing them to relate on a

more meaningful level. In order to do this effectively, the group leader must not only provide guidance and support as leader but must set the example for openness by his own involvement. If the leader merely moves others towards involvement and sets himself apart or above the group as some kind of uninvolved teacher or sage, it produces a new segregated situation in which he is the "superior" being and everyone else is on a lower, "sicker" level. This seriously retards interaction and polarizes the group in a parent-child dimension. It is essential for the leader to be open with his own feelings, to be honestly concerned with the goal of becoming closer to everyone in the group, and most important to be open to the discovery of his own prejudices and willing to share their resolution with the group. To free him to do this, it is most helpful to have a co-leader of the opposite race. The presence of Black and white co-leaders in each group not only permits greater self expression on the part of the leaders, but also provides a ready source of ethnic and cultural validation which helps clarify racial problems.

The following illustrates the way in which one White group leader's progressive involvement effected group progress at various stages in the group. In the first meeting of his group the group leader was painfully aware that there were only two blacks present with but seven whites. He felt the blacks to be terribly outnumbered, but since they didn't mention it, neither did he. It later emerged that at this point he was timid about calling attention to color at any level of involvement, and thus missed an opportunity for offering realistic support. During the same meeting one of the blacks, a skilled office in a major Civil Rights group, spent much of the time talking about various programs in which he was involved. He was a large portly man. Although he spoke well, the leader had difficulty listening to him. His attention was actually focussed on the speaker's

lips and his hair. His prevailing feeling was of surprise that such fluent speach should be coming form someone who looked so much like a Pullman porter. He said nothing of this fantasy either but listened politely. The speaker seemed enthusiastic about the plans for the group but never returned to another meeting. If the leader had openly expressed his concern that the blacks were outnumbered, and if he had revealed his prejudiced imagery in the surprised non-hostile way in which he had perceived it, he would have become more involved with the black member and the chances of this member's returning would have been better.

At the next meeting the leader was impressed by the physical features of a dark woman who looked and spoke at times as if she might belong to his old familiar category of "maid". There was, however, a forcefulness in her voice that commanded attention and a self-assuredness that evoked respect. At first he found himself intrigued by the contrast between the redness of her mouth when she opened it to speak and the blackness of her skin. Soon however, he forgot her appearance and listened to her story. She had just come from the home of a friend, a black woman who was being terrorized by an unkown white man in her neighborhood. Her friend was being barraged by obscene letters and phone calls, threatening to kill her unless she met him. After the police had failed to help her, she had turned to her friend, our group member, in her panic. The member had been late to the meeting because she was so reluctant to leave her friend. She had arranged to spend the night with her and if necessary to meet the man with her, in a direct confrontation. The leader was astounded by her bravery and deeply touched by her loyalty. The depth of that feeling was matched by the depth of his shame for having reacted to her first on the basis of color. He felt a strange surge of emotion, a mixture of joy at

being able to care for her a a person and sadness at his previous prejudice. He wanted to ask forgiveness from this woman who was so unselfish and far braver than he could be. Most of the group members had similiar feelings. They had all been transfixed by her story. The experience proved to be a turning point for the group. Instead of being members of two separate races confronting each other with intellectual questions, they were all fellow humans, joined together by the fear and beauty of this woman's story, anxious to help her and to be a part of her life. The whites sensed that indeed they needed her more, or at least as much as, she needed them. They needed her sense of loyalty and bravery and wanted to become closer to her in order to share these aspects of her life. This was the first of many times in which one could feel his prejudice desolving.

Involvement of the group leader at a much deeper intrapsychic level, is exemplified by an incident which occured about eight sessions later. Anthony, a moderately militant young black member, invited the group to a christening party for his first child. At the next meeting the group leader told Anthony how meaningful and pleasant it had been for him to be a guest in Anthony's home. Anthony ignored this expression of friendship with a nonchalant comment about how he, too, had enjoyed the drinking and music. Then we went on to talk about the need for a separate black nation within the country and launched into a warm interchange with Robert, another black in the group whose personality was different from, but complemented his own. They realized how much they needed each other. It looked as if they might become fast friends who could benefit from each other greatly. The group leader acknowledged how much they had to offer each other, but he also expressed his own hurt at being left out by the twosome. With this, Anthony saw that he had indeed left the white man out. He expressed sorrow about it, because the group leader did mean something

to him as a friend. This brought up a new discussion of the ramifications of racial separation.

The same situation occured at the next meeting. This time Robert expressed, with great conviction, his feeling that the blacks in the group did not need the whites. They had lived in the homes of whites as servants and knew all about them, but whites knew nothing of them except an Uncle Tom exterior. The white leader felt the exclusion even more strongly this time. He felt personally useless as an individual, and he experienced hopelessness about the possible value of the group in which he had invested so much of himself. Later he began to feel angry at both Robert and Anthony and expressed this feeling although he didn't understand it. That night he dreamed that Anthony was being carried off by a group of blacks, much darker than he was. They were going to stab him and perhaps castrate him for something he had not done. The leader identified strongly with Anthony in the dream and as he awakened he was calling out helplessly to the attackers that what they were doing was unjust and a horrible mistake.....

When he related the dream to the group, at the next meeting, the leader realized that he had indeed been made to feel like an impotent castrate by the feeling that the blacks had no use for him. The dream dramatically illustrated both of the feelings he had had in the group, the hopeless incompetence of not being able to feel effective resulting from black rejection, and the retaliatory rage against Anthony. In response to his discussion of the dream, Anthony and Robert smiled in unison; Robert spoke for them both: "Now you know how it feels to be treated as we are." In this episode the white leader did indeed live through the injustice of not having his capabilities recognized and needed, as it is experienced daily by blacks. For the first time, he could really understand their frustration and rage.

Through his own personal involvement, the group leader was showing the group that it was safe to involve oneself on an open emotional level with other group members. He could later share with the group his new personal understanding of Negro bitterness and, even more meaningfully, show how this understanding permitted him eventually to have a deeper kind of friendship with Anthony and Robert.

RESISTANCE TO PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT

Many people came to their first meetings with an air of intellectual curiosity, either because they felt something "should be done" about interracial problems or because they were active workers in various racially oriented movements. It was difficult, but particularly important, to invite them in the first session or two they attended to talk about their own personal feelings about being black or white. Otherwise they would soon drop out of the group to continue doing "their work" without ever recognizing the personal biases which often hampered their ability to cross racial barriers effectively. Often these people seemed to be using their professions in an attempt to work out their racial problems without facing them squarely.

The most common defenses against interaction were denial and focusing on people and events outside the group. It took many weeks for some members to feel comfortable enough in the group to relate on a personal level. While the principle effectiveness of the group lay in open emotional interaction of a personal nature among its members, conversations about topics peripheral to the group did serve as a medium for reducing initial anxieties about being together. Timing was important in the introduction of more open expressions of feelings. On several occasions new members came into the group and expressed rage during the first meeting they attended, before having established relationships with any of the other

members. They were merely using the group as a sounding board. The leader's task in this case was to let the newcomer learn that the group really wanted to get to know him and was not going to permit itself to be used in such an impersonal way. An appropriate comment in such a situation might be: "You're treating our whole group like a 'nigger' when you blast off at us that way without even trying to get to know us. " People who could express themselves openly did become indispensable assets to the group when they learned to do it on a personal, intragroup level.

DEALING WITH THE REALITIES OF PREJUDICE IN THE COMMUNITY

Often the interaction of a meeting would center around the sharing of a particular injustice experienced by a black member because of his race. Most of the whites in the group would listen in shocked sympathy, for the first time feeling the true impact of being black in a white society. For the blacks this provided catharsis and sometimes stimulated practical advise for coping with the situation. For the group as a whole it tended to promote group cohesiveness against the hatred and prejudice in the "outside world". But if such a discussion went on too long or if it faded off into an intellectual discourse on discrimination, it posed a technical problem for the group leader because it diverted attention away from the feelings group members were actually experiencing toward one another.

If the problem under discussion seemed real but hopeless, the leader might sympathize with the harshness of the situation and point out that althought we can not actually resolve such problems in our group, we can do something about the way we feel about one another. If the discussion did not seem to involve the group emotionally, at all, he might focus

attention on the resistance by indicating in a personally involved way, that members concentrate exclusively on a problem outside the group..

At one meeting, Joe spoke enviously of the higher pay received by the white bosses at his plant, implying that if he weren't black he would have a higher paying position. Manny, a white manager at the same plant, listened with paternalistic sympathy. The group leader sensed the covert rage between the two and pointed out that their mutual politeness had an insincere quality. After they were finally able to express some open anger to one another, Manny could see that he was playing "good father" to the blacks to cover his feelings of guilt and anger. Joe could see how his hatred of whites was giving him a bad reputation at a plant that was actually trying actively to upgrade the status of its black employees. He also learned that as long as his energies were consumed by hatred of the white establishment, he didn't have to face his fear of his own inadequacy, as he might have to do if he took advantage of the opportunities for advancement which actually existed.

USING PERSONALITY DIFFERENCES AS A MEANS OF UNDERCUTTING RACIAL SEPARATENESS

Differences in personality produce both an attractive and repellent force between individuals in the group. The resultant personality encounters are often so fundamentally meaningful that they make encounters on a racial level between the group members assume secondary significance. The following description shows how the utilization of differences in personality may bridge the gap between races.

This group was meeting for the first time as part of a one-day Institute established for the express purpose of promoting the Dialogue Between Blacks and Whites. None of the members of the group knew one another

except for the co-leaders, a white male psychiatrist and a black female social worker who had themselves been participants in an earlier interracial encounter group. There were six blacks and four whites in the group, all middle class, ranging in age from 27 to 50. The group began with the comments of one of the older men, Mike, about the differences between the warmth of the sun and the coldness of the shadows as he had walked to the meeting room. The group leader asked him if he felt cold with us. Mike said that he didn't. The leader described a fantasy he had at that moment of Mike going to a white restaurant and asked Mike if the coldness here reminded him of the coldness Mike must feel as a black man going into a white restaurant. Mike again said that he didn't feel that coldness, although he might have had some discomfort. Acknowledging the fact that the fantasy could have been his own projection, the group leader then cited a situation in which he had felt very cold and left out because he had seen a sign saying "No Jews Allowed." Mike responded to this by saying in effect "I'm much worse off than you because a black man can never hide his identity." Then Mary, a white girl, said "I feel cold in any strange group. I don't know if it is because this group is integrated or not." Another white girl, Ann, said the same thing, and looked even more frightened as she said it. Mike went on in an intellectual manner about how Negroes are left out. The leader pointed out that there were two frightened cold girls right there in the group and that he was leaving them out. Mike ignored this and continued his discourse. The two group leaders finally got angry at Mike and pointed out how intellectual he was about everything. In response to this, Rachael, an older black woman, said "I feel sorry for Mary and Ann. They do look frightened and cold." Ann asked her to sit next to her so that she wouldn't feel so frightened.

Rachael said, "Of course," and came over and clasped Ann's hand. Then she took the hand of the other white girl, who was sitting nearby, and commented on how cold they really were. She crossed both her hands with the white girls hands in a lovely, warm gesture. Mike went on intellectually, until the group leader broke in and asked him how he felt about what had gone on among the three women. Mike said it was O.K. The group leader said he really didn'tunderstand him that he felt it was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen. The co-leader broke in and said that she felt that she couldn't stand it unless people could feel things emotionally. Mike replied that he had to feel things his own way. He was given a lot of understanding and support at that point by Mary, one of the white girls who had been so frightened and who was now relieved. She said "I'm glad I was accepted the way I was. I think I can take Mike the way he is." Mike replied with a grateful warm smile. Mary reached out her hand to Mike and he clasped it warmly.

The group continued in this manner, with most of the members directly involved to a somewhat lesser extent, but all indirectly touched to the point where they could, if they wished, meet again. The theme during the last part of this session was the fear of meeting again socially in a community where there was so much potential for racial hatred. The group felt that the next logical move was to meet together socially in one another's homes or to have a party.

This illustrates how personality differences were utilized spontaneously by the group, and afforded an opportunity for mutual support and growth in self-esteem. This occurred across color lines and without any direct support from the group leaders.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN THE GROUP

At times there has been a real ethnic barrier to verbal communication which makes it extremely difficult for one group member to understand another. Nuances of phraseology were miscontrued by some members. Some members had not had the experience of expressing their feelings in a verbal manner at all. These difficulties made physical activities especially important. Touching, holding hands, putting an arm around a shoulder, as an appropriate expression of closeness or warmth, did as much as or more than anything else to break the racial barriers. One sensitivity technique employed successfully after the froup had been meeting for several weeks involved having the members form pairs. The leader directed the members of each pair to look directly into one another's eyes, to try to feel the other person as a human being like himself who enjoyed the warmth of wholehearted acceptance. Each member was to take the other's hands and to hold them,examine them in detail, noting their strength or softness, their beauty or blemishes, contrasting their color with the color of his own hands, noting how the contrast brought out the individuality of each color, the black a richer black; the white a whiter white; then to feel the other's arms and shoulders, head and hair, going through the process slowly to really experience the touch of a member of the other race. Afterwards, each member shared with the group the thoughts and feelings his contact with his partner had evoked. Other sensitivity techniques (Schultz) may be equally useful for promoting both a sense of racial identity and group cohesiveness.

RACIAL DENTITY AND GROUP COHESIVENESS

One of the major fears of the blacks entering the group has been that pride in blackness and identification as a spearate race, are endangered by the closeness with whites in the group. This is based on the belief that hostility toward whites is essential for black pride. It

is true that pride in blackness has enabled blacks to express latent hatreds for whites - but experience with our groups has shown that this pride can actually be enhanced as hatred is reduced and replaced by affection. In a small group it is easy for the members and the group leaders to sense a feeling of group cohesiveness or group devisiveness.

At times, identification with one race or the other interfered with group cohesiveness. This became a most important consideration in the work of the group. There is a healthy component to this identification, just as there is in other group therapy situations. In the usual therapy situation, and individual will often be angry at the group for trying to take away his individuality, and the group leader is constantly confronted with the paradox of preserving and enhancing what is good in the individuality of a member, without destroying group cohesiveness. This is an even more pressing and important problem in interracial groups, where our goal is to enhance the value of the individual races, and preserve what is good in racial identities, but at the same time identify more fundamental human values which can unite the races instead of separating them.

The small group is a potent medium in which this flow between separation and togetherness can be observed and experienced at an intense level. The therapist and group members have to delineate, by their own preceptiveness, those aspects of racial identity which are conducive to the growth of the the individual in the group and those which are destructive. We have generally found that those aspects of racial identity which were conducive to the growth of the individual were also conducive to the feeling of group cohesiveness. The following examples show how this small group identity may be used to clarify issues of black power separation.

Ada described her strivings to find a sense of belonging, security, and pride in blackness. She talked about this in an open, inviting way which seemed to ask the group to be with her. Our natural response was, "Yes, you are black, and we like you, and in some strange way it's even easier to like you because you are black." This seemed to help her to like herself because she was black. Her plea was an open invitation which brought about group cohesiveness and a closeness between the black and white members and the two races. It also emphasized her racial individuality.

In one session, a bright and articulate black man told how he had risen from the slums, gone on to graduate school, and now had returned to the slums to work in an effort to help the children there find themselves and be proud of themselves. His tale was a moving, inspiring one, and we all felt close to him. At the next meeting, however, he felt more open. He began to talk about black thinking and white thinking. He insisted that we could not possibly feel the same way he did because we were white and he was black and we'd had different experiences. We granted that our different experiences prevented identical thinking but we felt that it was the anger and bitterness in his voice which actually separated us from him. He felt it was very necessary for blacks to be by themselves in order to feel their own value, because in a primarily white society they would always feel less than they were or could be. As he spoke of this black separatism, the group became more and more despondent. He was in effect denying and destroying what had actually occurred between himself and the group the week before. Perhaps he had not adequately preceived our closeness with him, or maybe he was running away from it. As a group we felt almost paralyzed. All the group leader could do was to point out how his denial and rejection of us made us feel. He seemed

upset and apologetic as he left. In later sessions he learned how his quest for black separateness came from his own uneasiness about being black, his own feelings of insecurity about it, his own rejection of blackness. And he learned through the group medium that his sense of identity as black could indeed be achiedved among whites as well as with people of his own race.

At the almost opposite pole of this problem is the phenomenon of pseudo or partial acceptance of the other which gives either false or temporary cohesiveness to the group but which avoids true dialogue. This occurs most frequently when blacks talk of the injustices committed against them by whites outside the group and the white members commiserate with them, but neither group talks about the real feelings of prejudice operative in the group at that moment.

CONCLUSION

Booker T. Washington (1956) said, in 1885. "....the whole future of the Negro rested largely upon the question as to whether or not he should make himself, through his skill, intelligence, and character, of such undeniable value to the community in which he lived that the community could not dispense with his presence....". Dr. Washington, through his creative genius, did make himself respected, loved, and needed by the entire country. However, the crux of the value of one ordinary human being to another does not depend upon genius, but upon some other less dramatic but equally positive contribution. The opportunity to be of value to each other occurs over and over again in many ways, in a truly open black-white interchange in a small group. As the members learn to be of importance to each other in the group they find ways to survive together as a group. If this can be extended to the community at large, as it must, then we may all survive together.

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